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READING ACROSS FIRISHTA AND CHIMALPAHIN

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ABSTRACT

In this essay, I reflect on the position of a postcolonized historian traversing space and time, thinking and linking to histories of European arrivals to Mexico and India. The essay is concerned with early seventeenth-century histories by Chimalpahin and Firishta, who documented their worlds before and after the arrival of Europeans. I argue for a transregional decolonial approach to thinking about historical violence and the formation of disciplinary histories.

Keywords: postcoloniality, decolonization, historiography, Deccan, Mexico, Persian, Nahuatl

How does one write about that frisson of recognition historians from one previous colony feel when they encounter another postcolony for the first time? Is the frisson itself an imprint of coloniality? Does the recognition come from knowing and living in the planned permanence of colonial architecture—whether they are the French and British constructions of Zamalek in Cairo or the cantonments of Lahore? Or is it even more granular, such as in the happenstance movement of the bungalow, a colonial architectural style that is now a signature construction from Calcutta to Aden, Singapore, and California? Yet again, it may be that the materiality that produces this instance of recognition lies in the very making of postcolonized bodies themselves: in the smells of food cooked with spices that traveled this way and that; in the infrastructure of colonizing language as the medium of communication; in the streams of labor that flow from the erstwhile colonies to the metropole; in the globalized affect of academia and the itinerant theories that radiate from one discipline to another. I felt all of it viscerally during my first visit to Cairo, my first time in Mexico City, and my first glimpse of Kampala: the familiarity of a distant relative's face when you meet them for the first time.

I took the opportunity to live in Mexico City with the aim of finding time and space to read an early seventeenth-century Persian history of “Hindustan” (a name for what was later colonized as British India and, after 1947, partitioned as India and Pakistan). As I was making my way through the four-volume critical edition of the *Tārkh-i Firishta*, I was also learning about another early seventeenth-century history of conquest, one that was written by the Nahua historian Chimalpahin.¹ My own experiences of a frisson—having been born and raised in

1. Muḥammad Qāsim Hindū Shāh Astarābādī Firishta, *Tārkh-i Firishta*, ed. Muḥammad Rizā Naṣīrī, 4 vols. (Tehran: Anjuman-i Āsār va Mafākhir-i Farhangī, 2009), and Don Domingo de San

the postcolony of Pakistan—intersected with that frisson stimulated by reading two histories of colonial arrivals and conquests that were written nearly simultaneously by historians of two different disappearing worlds.

Tārīkh-i Firishta, which Muḥammad Qāsim Firishta (who was born sometime in the 1570s) wrote in the first decades of the seventeenth century while he was at the court of Ibrāhīm ‘Ādil Shah II in the Deccan, was a key text used by Europeans to construct a violent template of Hindustani history. *Tārīkh-i Firishta* is the first comprehensive history of Hindustan addressing a complete temporal and geographic sense of the subcontinent. At least two recensions exist—one from 1608 and another from 1614, though there are dated events in the manuscripts that occurred as late as 1623–24. Firishta labeled his history *Gulshan-i Ibrāhīmī* (The garden of Ibrahim) and *Naurasnama* (The book of the newest flavor), which were both references to his patron and employer, Ibrāhīm ‘Ādil Shah II. In his conclusion, he refers to his book as *Tārīkh-i Firishta o Shahnāma* (Firishta’s history and book of kings)—a gesture to the classic of Persian literary tradition, Firdawsī’s eleventh-century *Shahnāma*. In other words, Firishta’s history is deeply embedded in his political present and his literary and historiographic past. The work comprises over a thousand folio pages—a recent critical edition is in four volumes. *Tārīkh-i Firishta* has a long preface, which is followed by twelve chapters. Eleven chapters are histories of rulers in different places across Hindustan—Lahore, Delhi, Deccan, Gujarat, Malwa, Khandesh, Bengal, Multan, Sindh, Kashmir, and Malabar; the last chapter focuses on the Sufis and religious scholars of Hindustan. Firishta, writing while the Portuguese, Dutch, and English settlements had appeared in Surat and Calicut, concluded his work by summarizing all of the qualities that make Hindustan a Heavenlike place and better than any other inhabited land in the world. Did he insist on characterizing Hindustan in this way because he sensed that his world was materially threatened by the Europeans? Firishta’s contemporary, Chimalpahin (b. 1579), wrote a century after the conquest of Mexico; Chimalpahin was reconstructing a world that was already lost. What would Chimalpahin have said to Firishta, and how would Firishta have responded to Chimalpahin’s work?

The linking of Latin America and South Asia is generally done within the realm of postcolonial theory or the rubrics of migration, economic development, or third-world politics; this is not what drives my effort here. My essay also is not an exercise in so-called connected histories, which, though valuable, posit agentive Europeans learning about the Orient. These reflections also aren’t meant to be part of a “comparative” project, for I am cognizant of the extractive and exclusionary history of comparison that underlies the philological and ethnological projects of the nineteenth century. I am certainly not excavating any causal links or lineages of descent. Rather, this project developed when I began to think about the histories that create frissons and the historians within whose bodies that shock of recognition is felt. There is, certainly, resonance in the histories that I felt within myself when reading them, but not as an artifact in history. This provides some difficulties in conceptualizing my reading across archives. After

Antón Muñón Chimalpahin Quauhtlehuanitzin, *Annals of His Time*, ed. and transl. James Lockhart, Susan Schroeder, and Doris Namala (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006).

all, the self of the historian, especially the one writing an intellectual history, is meant to remain outside of felt experience, otherwise the historian's work would not constitute social science (this is the discipline of the contemporary academy to which history most often claims membership). The felt experience has to be mitigated by disciplinary gatekeeping—pushing it into other genres of writing outside of history proper. Yet in taking the frisson of recognition that I felt while in Mexico City and extending it to link Firishta and Chimalpahin, I deploy Aimé Césaire's notion that "poetic knowledge is born in the great silence of scientific knowledge."² I also take heed of the call for alternative epistemology that Patricia Hill Collins articulated as a challenge to "certified knowledge."³

In the summer of 2017, I was wandering at the Monte Albán archeological site and looking up sources about the life of Alfonso Caso and the Mexican project of recovering material memories of its precolonial past. I was specifically interested in figuring out how European colonists had used violence as a mechanism through which to understand the region's precolonial polities. I had only recently begun to read scholarship on Aztec and Mayan pasts and to recognize the ways in which some of the primary sources of information were themselves universal histories that were written around the same time as the colonial project. While walking around Monte Albán, I found ample material evidence for how dynastic rule was upended and reestablished.⁴ This material evidence contrasted the ways in which colonial historiography itself treated the question of violence. A rather pertinent example of this colonial historiography is Alexander von Humboldt's 1811 *Essai politique sur la royaume de la Nouvelle-Espagne*, in which Humboldt deployed Spanish conquest accounts, such as those by Hernán Cortés that argued for a "new" continent cleared of the Aztec "barbarity," in order to discuss nineteenth-century "Indian barbarity."⁵

The process of making my way through Firishta's lengthy, rich text, with its innumerable references to previous and current histories, epics, and stories, was slow going. At that time, I was mainly concerned with thinking about violence as depicted in colonial historiography. Temple destruction and the annihilation of enemy soldiers as well as of civilian populations have been major historiographic concerns for South Asian historians. This was largely due to the valence and credibility given by colonial historians to precolonial Persian histories and their often-incredulous claims about the wide-scale violence that helped facilitate the conquest of various parts of Hindustan. The British colonial state masked its own generative violence in thick descriptions of Muslim outsiders and invaders, collecting and excerpting snippets of Persian histories that spoke of "towers of

2. Aimé Césaire, "Poetry and Knowledge," in *Lyric and Dramatic Poetry, 1946–82*, transl. Clayton Eshleman and Annette Smith (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1990), xlii.

3. Patricia Hill Collins, "The Social Construction of Black Feminist Thought," *Signs* 14, no. 4 (1989), 773.

4. For more on this, see Michael Lind and Javier Urcid, "Political Evolution during the Xoo Phase and the Collapse of Monte Albán," in *The Lords of Lambityeco: Political Evolution in the Valley of Oaxaca during the Xoo Phase* (Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2010), 317–44.

5. See Alexander de Humboldt, *Political Essay on the Kingdom of New Spain*, transl. John Black, vol. 1 (London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme, and Brown, 1811). Humboldt used this history to argue for archeological and landscape surveys meant primarily to fill in the gaps in history (ix–x).

skulls” and “rivers of blood.”⁶ With the help of this textual corpus, the British colonial argument was streamlined as follows: whereas the subcontinent had suffered under hundreds of years of Muslim despotism, which was enacted through an originary violence of conquest and maintained through deviant forms of power, this state of affairs was being slowly reversed by the liberal light of British colonial rule. Colonial historians used Persian histories to make this specific case for the past and the present of British India in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.⁷ The two central theoreticians of this narrative template were James Mill and his son John Stuart Mill, both of whom were employed by the British East India Company. Although the distortion of histories by British orientalist was known and contested even by early twentieth-century Hindustani historians, the colonial paradigm remains calcified in contemporary politics in India.⁸

While in spaces like Monte Albán, the colonial state set about excavating proof of indigenous violence to buttress its so-called civilizing project; this archeological impetus to discover large-scale sites with human remains was completely absent from the subcontinental context. From its beginnings in the 1830s, the British Archeological Survey remained focused on uncovering “Ancient India”—albeit almost always as a side effect of colonial railway or dam-building projects. In the many excavations, however, neither mass graves nor burial sites with civilians, or even war casualties, have ever been discovered in South Asia. This stands in contrast to the archeological projects carried out in Mexico. Still, it was not as if violence was treated differently in the two contexts, for the European colonists used the Aztec sacrifices and collective burial sites in many of the same ways as the British used the Persian histories in the subcontinent.

As far as the British colonial administration was concerned, the Persian histories were the graveyards for Hindus who had suffered violent deaths. The Persian histories, specifically that of Firishta, were thus mined for their depictions of battles and their enumerations of killings. For the British, the texts operated as sites that marked Muslim despotism and violence and could only be read or used to dig up and display the vagaries of Muslim despots. Although this was an imperial historiographic project, it functioned very much akin to the archeological efforts in Mexico.

Another resonance came from the ways in which Chimalpahin’s histories were treated as simple chronological accounts that could be mined for facts even as the European colonizers elided the social worlds depicted in these texts.⁹ The colonial soldier-scribes of the British East India Company in Calcutta were

6. Henry Miers Elliot, *The History of India, as Told by Its Own Historians*, vol. 3, *The Muhammadan Period*, ed. John Dowson (London: Trübner and Company, 1871), 190.

7. A similar strategy was deployed by colonial forces in Peru. See Ralph Bauer, “‘EnCounter’ Colonial Latin American Indian Chronicles: Felipe Guaman Poma de Ayala’s History of the ‘New’ World,” *American Indian Quarterly* 25, no. 2 (2001), 274–312.

8. As recently as September 2020, Uttar Pradesh’s Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath proclaimed the Mughals to be invaders who cannot be valorized or commemorated. See “How can Mughals be our heroes, asks Yogi Adityanath as he renames Mughal Museum near Taj after Shivaji,” *Indian Express*, 16 September 2020, <https://indianexpress.com/article/cities/lucknow/how-can-mughals-be-our-heroes-says-up-cm-as-he-renames-mughal-museum-near-taj-after-shivaji-6596317/>.

9. Camilla Townsend, *Annals of Native America: How the Nahuas of Colonial Mexico Kept Their History Alive* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 164–75.

also keen to read the Persian histories from Hindustan as mere chronologies. In 1863, for instance, William Nassau Lees published a study of Juzjani's history, *Tabaqāt-i Nāsiri* (ca. 1260), that characterized it as an annals; Lees included the explicit proviso that such histories of Hindustan, written in Persian by Muslim authors, were of little use except for their capacity to offer a chronology of the subcontinent's history.¹⁰ Lees's dismissal of Persian histories was reinforced by Henry Miers Elliot's *The History of India, as Told by Its Own Historians*, which was published in 1867–77. Elliot was adamant that a history such as Firishta's was worth reading only in order to excavate details about past acts of violence, numbers of deceased, and destroyed temples.

Hence, the same impulse motivated both sets of colonial historiographies: colonial violence was distorted and displaced onto a native past. In the case of Mexico, colonial forces sought evidence of indigenous populations' supposed barbarity by excavating mass graves; in the case of Hindustan, colonial forces figuratively excavated Persian histories in search of past acts of violence.

Experiencing Chimalpahin's account through recent scholarship on it opened my eyes to rethinking Firishta's work as a social history that contained a different way to write about Hindustan. From those beginnings, I recognized that Firishta was very explicit in making his case for writing a new type of history. He grounded his history in a geography comprised of intellectuals, resting on the works of seven centuries of historians and poets, including Firdawsi (d. 1025), 'Unsuri (d. 1041), al-Bīrūnī (ca. 1051), Abu'l Fazl (ca. 1600), and many others. Far from providing a year-by-year account that could be mined for historical facts, Firishta presented a world with elite political figures, nobility, rajas, and sultans as well as merchants, travelers, peasants, and traders milling about in city streets and agrarian fields. For example, in his history of Gujarat, Firishta introduces to the reader a whole host of characters: a rebellious landed elite, a cabal of commanders and courtiers, thirty thousand rebel troops, a transgender palace guard, the Nizam Shahi Sultan, the Raja of Malwa, the Raja of Junagarh, a mediator, a butcher, an unjust governor, the Prophet (in a dream), Rajput bandits, a drunk elephant, groups of bandits and highway robbers, a community of animist pirates, four thousand Baluchi bandits, a scholar from Samarkand and his family, a Raja of an island who attacked the scholar from Samarkand, the governor of Khambat, the rebellious elite of Ahmadabad, the people of Malabar, the Rajput Raja of Baroda, a group of merchants who attacked the Raja of Abu, a rebel commander of the Bahmani who took control of ports in Gujarat, a rebel commander of Gujarat who fled to Malwa, a rebel commander of Gujarat who went to Khandesh, rebellious commanders in Ahmadabad, Portuguese ships and troops at Chaul, a rebel commander in Thanesar, a rebel commander in Burhanpur, the Sultan of Delhi, a Sufi saint in Patan, and an ambassadorial mission from the Shah of Iran.¹¹

For Firishta, writing a history of Hindustan meant writing a history of the many people who inhabited Hindustan. It also meant documenting the many encroaching

10. W. Nassau Lees and H. W. Hammond, "Materials for the History of India for the Six Hundred Years of Mohammadan Rule Previous to the Foundation of the British Indian Empire," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland*, n.s., 3, no. 2 (1868), 414–77.

11. Firishta, *Tārīkh-i Firishta*, 4:56–88.

threats that were beginning to disrupt the lives of those people. And in his *Tārīkh*, he depicted no greater threat than what he described as the war-mongering *farang* (Europeans), who took territories and resources and fought among themselves in the Indian Ocean, all the while behaving cordially at the courts of the kings of Hindustan. For Firishta, the Europeans adopted a facade in the courts of Hindustan by exhibiting deference to the king's political power and trade relationships; such performances, he believed, hid the Europeans' true intents.

Firishta ended his comprehensive history of Hindustan where the Portuguese and English encounters began—in the western ghats of Malabar, where, he explained, sea trade had brought Jews and Christians to Hindustan eons before his own time. Firishta recounted the experiences of the Raja of Malabar, Samari, when he encounters a group of traders who, while returning from visiting Adam's footprint in Sarandip, were shipwrecked in Kodungallur. Samari is intrigued by the message about equality that the traders relay. After they mention the Prophet's miracle of splitting the moon, he asks his own court's historians to check their records for any sightings of such an event. The historians verify the traders' account, and Samari converts to Islam. Firishta detailed a few different accounts concerning whether Samari leaves Malabar to visit Mecca, but he concluded that the most important detail was that Muslims were allowed to build mosques, erect houses, and flourish in Malabar. The Jews and Christians were jealous of the Muslims, Firishta explained, but they remained silent because the Brahmin rulers supported the Muslims' presence.¹²

Firishta bemoaned the arrival of the Portuguese, the wars that followed (in which the Deccan sultans were unable to come to the aid of the Malabari kings), and the creation of Portuguese enclaves along the coastlines. The ruler of Malabar repeatedly asked for help from Muslim rulers in Hindustan. After stating that his ancestral home was under attack, the king pleaded that what was most upsetting was that the *farang* were harming the Muslims; even though he was not a Muslim, he had always supported them. He claimed that he was too weak to resist the Portuguese without further aid, for the Portuguese had wealth and troops far exceeding his; the kings of Hindustan, and those of Muslim countries elsewhere, must come to his aid and repel the Europeans. Firishta explained that, by 1556 CE, the fear-inducing Europeans had taken the ports of Hormuz, Muscat, Sumatra, Malwa, Mangalore, Bengal, and beyond, extending all the way to the frontier of China. By 1610 CE, when he wrote the *Tārīkh*, the English and the Portuguese had settled in Surat, becoming inhabitants of Hindustan. Firishta feared that this was the end of Hindustan.

Reading Firishta alongside his Latin American contemporaries, I was struck by the prescient nature of his comments about the Europeans. He saw them as unmoored from the lived histories of Hindustan's peoples. He saw the Europeans as conquerors who were bent on ecological and social devastation. He saw their Christianity as different from the Christianity that had existed in Hindustan before they arrived. Even as he recounted the history of Hindustan since 1498, could he have imagined what happened elsewhere in the world after 1492? Could Europe's presence at the fringes of Firishta's history offer a glimpse of a world that no longer existed? Firishta only mentioned the Europeans' arrival (and the

12. Firishta, *Tārīkh-i Firishta*, 4:540-42.

destruction that they brought with them) at the very end of his history—and briefly at that.

Alexander Dow, the British Army officer who “discovered” Firishta’s history in 1768, was content to read the first few chapters and interpret them as evidence of the supposedly foreign and despotic origins of Muslim rule in Hindustan. Firishta’s history was displaced and unmoored from the subcontinent when it was taken to Europe in excerpted translation. Through its French and German renditions, it became a key text for the universal philosophy of history that Voltaire, Kant, and, later, Herder and Hegel argued into existence. Firishta was inserted into the section of *Weltgeschichte* labeled “India.” Thus implanted between China and the Persians, Firishta’s Hindustan—what had since been called India—also ended. Hegel evacuated historical thought from India. He only considered India in order to comment on its aesthetic theory and advancements. The Muslims, deemed outsiders to India, did possess some rudimentary historical consciousness, but for Hegel, that thought was shaped by the Arabian desert. Thus, India lacked history and Muslims belonged to a specific geography: Firishta’s Hindustan would come to a historiographic end in the series of texts that followed Hegel’s.

In reading Firishta’s text in Mexico, I wanted to reanimate his history. I hoped to see the world that he saw, not the world that I know came to an end. As a postcolonized historian, I have long held that the precolonial episteme cannot be retrieved following the rupture of colonial thought. The postcolonized historian is shaped by the traumatized inheritance of colonial violence. Yet I was surprised to find that thinking laterally from Latin America was a much more empowering framework for thinking and saying something about the premodern subcontinent than struggling through the dense colonial archive had ever been.

Postcolonized historians of precolonial pasts are often accused of exhibiting nostalgia and attempting recuperation in their writings about the premodern. The historiography of South Asia has naturalized the colonial argument that violence shaped precolonial Hindustan and that Muslim difference is a fundamental analytic. Reading across Firishta and Chimalpahin enabled me to develop a decolonial philosophy of history. These works of history and their imbricated afterlives in European colonial thought revealed the importance of piecemeal disentangling of the colonial episteme in my own work. In writing *The Loss of Hindustan: The Invention of India*, I demonstrated the ways in which the ethics of history-writing that framed Firishta’s history offer us a way forward: not toward an imagined or glorified past but toward a decolonial future.¹³ By using the decolonial methodology to think about Hindustan through Mexico—indeed, by reading across parallel and intersecting pathways—we can hear new and resonant echoes of history.

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13. See Manan Ahmed Asif, *The Loss of Hindustan: The Invention of India* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2020), 222-25.